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New Materialist Philosophy

Response to Michelle N. Huang and Chad Shomura

Kyla Wazana Tompkins

ABSTRACT

I am very grateful to Michelle N. Huang and Chad Shomura for their extensive engagement with my short and rather off-the-cuff thoughts on the limits and possibilities of new materialism. Their detailed and thoughtful responses extend and flesh out the work that I started to do in my original essay, taking my bullet-pointed aggravation with new materialism's initial failure to deal with race, and using their own original research and interests to chart the direction and course of an extensive conversation that is, as they document, well underway. I am especially excited to see these two scholars take the time to give extensive shout-outs to both established and emergent scholars in the field. To see such radical intellectual hospitality in writerly practice is really thrilling.

One of those new scholars, clearly, is Michelle N. Huang, in her query into what the relation between the new materialism, race, and literary inquiry might be. I am totally sympathetic to her critique of the limits of identitarian critique—which she ties to Kandice Chuh's discussion of the intellectual limits of "aboutness" as a way of keeping minority writers tethered to a limited set of aesthetic problems. As well, I am one-hundred-percent persuaded by Huang's engagement with the problematics of the literary defense of "form" as that transcendent literary detail whose conscious artifice only serves to bolster the boundaries of a literary canon in which aesthetics transcend the apparent determinisms of history and politics. Against those limited hermeneutics, Huang poses a nuanced reading of a poem about an object in which the "form" of the object gestures to how "race is always embedded within the production of the cultural forms used to fabricate the human." The slippery subject-object relations of John Yau's 2012 poem, "Confessions of a Recycled Shopping Bag," give Huang a chance to explore how race might be embedded in a poem in such a way as to constitute a refusal to be "about" (says the poem: "*Confessions* is not a poem about race!") and a condition ("the refusal of this poem to be about race is nonetheless about a refusal of the poem to accept the conditions that make it possible for a poem, and therefore a poet, to claim or not claim humanity").

In this sense, thinking with the critical new materialism against the universality of the human, a category that has been claimed by some defenders of the aesthetic as the highest possible achievement that a poem can achieve, allows Huang, reading Yau, to open up a space in which literature works against its humanist imperatives, because, as Hortense Spillers writes: "The literary work describes, or carves out, an arena of choices, and in doing so, the writer suspends definitive judgment."¹

I fully concur with Chad Shomura that at fundamental stake in the turn to matter is the unavoidable reality that the earth is speaking back to the human at a rate and on a scale that cannot be avoided in this current period of ecological disaster that is being called “the Anthropocene.” I will note perhaps that the list of critics that he describes as working on the new materialisms from “within” the new materialisms instead of race, feminist or queer theory, are in fact already critical race, feminist, and queer theorists (Puar, Lee, Leong, Saldanha, and Tran) while the material feminisms he points to (Braidotti, Coole, Grosz, Barad, and Wilson) might well be feminist but at times fail to take up race. However, to say that “Tompkins and many feminist, queer, and critical race theorists dismiss ontology and view the idea of matter as lively to be a rather old, widely-shared story” is perhaps a bit speedy? I believe many of us to be engaged in the same work of thinking *with* matter as Shomura is and I look forward to future conversations with him, and to hearing about that work.

And indeed I find Shomura's account of the uses of thinking with matter in his own, new, project to be entirely in line with the work many critics—in particular women of color critics—are already engaged in, including some of those he names. Specifically I am thinking of those scholars whose work is drawing on the critical writings, as I point out in my own essay, of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, whose long-ignored writing in political theory and the history of ideas is rightfully re-emerging into view as more than simply “cultural” but also as political theory in its own right. I am interested to see what kinds of methodologies emerge from the crucial question Shomura poses at the end: what does an “onto-story” look like? Especially I am convinced by his idea that “fidelity to matter may restore a touch of messiness to critique.” This seems to me to be particularly true at the level of narrative form: what does a history of matter look like, and what temporalities emerge from thinking with materiality?

I'm all for messiness, more than a touch of it; it does seem to define the contemporary political moment from which we write. I look forward to future conversations with these talented scholars.

Notes

1. Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 84. [↗](#)

 [Bio](#)



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